

## Out of the Zenana Dabba

### Strategies for Enhancing Women's Political Representation

Madhu Kishwar

**T**HE Prime Minister himself could not make it that day. At a conference organised by the National Commission for Women in the last week of July, a few of us had been asked by the Commission to pose questions to the Prime Minister on his views regarding 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies. At the last minute we were informed that the Prime Minister could not keep his commitment and had sent his Minister for Social Welfare, Mr Ramoowalia, as a substitute.

I asked Mr Ramoowalia: "The United Front (UF) government has been rather quick to announce that they will introduce 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and in the state assemblies, along with a 33 percent reservation in government

jobs, through an amendment of the constitution. Why is it that the politicians who committed themselves to these measures have done nothing to enhance the participation of women within their respective parties? How can 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies work if there aren't enough women active in parties, if the parties don't have enough viable candidates to field? What measures of internal reform were these parties contemplating in order to include women in party decision making and leadership roles?"

Mr Ramoowalia graced me with an answer, which I must present in brief or I will have no space for anything else. He started off by saying, "I agree wholeheartedly with my sister, Madhu Kishwar, that social reform is the most

important matter before us" then quickly launched into a sermon on what he thought were important issues for social reform. He advised the august gathering of women leaders and activists come from all over the country that women needed to be saved from three social evils — first and foremost from the dowry system. The second important evil women need to be saved from are "evil mothers-in-law." And then he went on to describe how during his trip to England he had read a moving novel about the viciousness of an evil-hearted mother-in-law who made her daughter-in-law's life miserable. Thereafter he launched into a vituperative but hilarious attack at a "new social evil" — the corrupt non-government organisations (NGOs). He warned women that in the

name of helping them and other vulnerable sections of society, these greedy NGO leaders were actually exploiting women just like evil mothers-in-law do and lectured us on how our women needed to be saved from the evil designs of NGO leaders whose funds and grants his ministry was beginning to cut down. It is obvious that his answer had as little to do with my question as chalk with cheese.

His skirting of my question shows how little thinking has been done by our political leaders about this vital measure to provide 33 percent reservation for women through a constitutional amendment.

If those in ministerial positions like Ramoowalia haven't given a minute's thought to this issue, one can imagine the paltry extent of discussion and debate that must have taken place among the top leaders as well as among ordinary party workers on the subject. Unfortunately, even women lobbyists and MPs who have campaigned in favour of reservations do not seem to have done the required homework before putting forward their demand. The proposed bill mindlessly follows the reservation scheme for women already in operation at the *zilla parishad* and *panchayat* level, which has by now demonstrated many inherent flaws and weaknesses. The new reservation bill fails to avoid those same mistakes.

### **The Magic Number**

The provisions of the reservation bill as presented before the Parliament in the monsoon session can be summed up as follows:

■ One-third of seats will be reserved for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures through a constitutional amendment.

■ These reservations are meant for an indefinite period, unlike reservations for SCs and STs which

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lapse unless extended after every ten years.

■ The reserved constituencies are to be determined through a lottery system. For SCs and STs, constituencies are reserved on the basis of population proportion. Constituencies with a high SC/ST population are selected for a period of time and are supposed to be delimited after some years. But since the population of women is evenly spread throughout the country, this formula cannot be applied for them. The lottery system will mean that before every election a different set of constituencies will be declared as reserved for women.

■ There is also a provision for parallel reservations for SCs and STs, which is to say women belonging to SCs and STs will be getting one-third of seats reserved for people of that category — in other words there will be reservations within reservations.

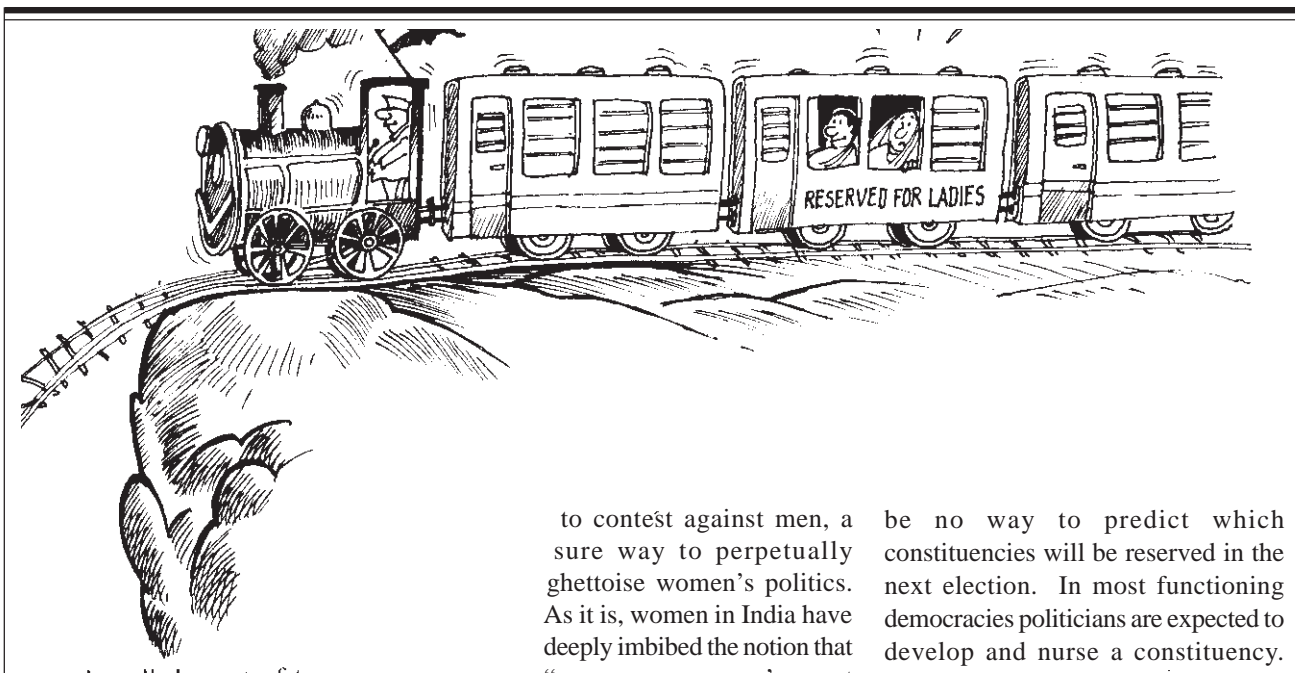
There are several problems inherent in this particular scheme. To begin with, why a 33 percent quota? What is the significance of this number? Why not 13 or 43 or even 73 percent? The reservation quota for all other groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes has been determined on the basis of their numerical strength in the overall population. Not so for

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women. In India the proportion of women as compared to men is a little less than 50 percent. So why not 49 percent reservation for women? Does the magical figure of 33 percent represent some projection into the near future of our declining sex ratio? Are our policy-makers anticipating the advent of all kinds of new technologies to bring down the already low sex ratio so that women will soon only be one-third of the population?

This is not at all to suggest that 33 percent reservation is a small amount. Even in Sweden, a country considered the most advanced democracy with the highest percentage of women in positions of political power anywhere in the world, women occupied 40 percent of elected parliamentary seats in 1994. This after nearly a century of effort and struggle. The figures for other "leading" democracies are pretty dismal. According to a survey done in 1994, women occupied nine percent of parliamentary seats in the UK; eleven percent in the USA's House of Representatives; seven percent in India (which has dropped to six percent in 1996); six percent in France; eight percent in Australia; four percent in Thailand; three percent in Japan; and two percent in Egypt and Turkey. Thus by reserving one-third of the seats in legislatures, India will be ensuring a quantum leap. The very presence of 181 women in the Lok Sabha will make them much more visible, a drastic difference from their minuscule presence today.

However, accepting the present scheme of 33 percent permanent reservation for women is like demanding that some seats be reserved in every bus for women or the equivalent of a *zenana dabba* (ladies compartment) in every train. Men then come to expect women to remain confined to the 'ladies section'



and assume that all the rest of the seats are reserved for them.

Even though there will be no legal bar on women standing from general constituencies, it is highly unlikely that women will be given tickets from outside the reserved constituencies. This same pattern is evident with SCs and STs who have been permanently confined to reserved constituencies. At the *panchayat* and *zilla parishad* level, in most states party bosses are not giving tickets to women to contest from general constituencies — which are assumed to be reserved for men. Only in Karnataka and West Bengal have women managed to go beyond 33 percent. For our state legislatures, it will be much harder for women to secure tickets beyond the stipulated quota because of intense competition at this level.

The present scheme of reservation will ensure that women will enter the electoral battle only against other women and never get an opportunity

to contest against men, a sure way to perpetually ghettoise women's politics. As it is, women in India have deeply imbibed the notion that "women are women's worst enemies" because of the way they are pitched against each other in the family structure. Their dependence on men estranges them from other women because men mediate women's relations with the outside world. Therefore, political solidarity among women is hard to build. If even in the political realm, women are constantly pitched only against other women, there will be far less possibility of their working together as a concerted lobby cutting across party lines, at least on some crucial women-related issues. It will strengthen the tendency to view other women as permanent rivals rather than possible allies.

The lottery system of gender-based reservations will lead to a fresh set of constituencies being earmarked for women at every election. There would

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***An unpredictable and rotating reservation policy has resulted in killing politicians' incentive to nurse their constituencies.***

be no way to predict which constituencies will be reserved in the next election. In most functioning democracies politicians are expected to develop and nurse a constituency. However, an unpredictable and rotating reservation policy, already implemented at the *zilla parishad* level, has resulted in killing women's incentive to build their own constituencies because politicians have no way of knowing which ones will be declared as reserved constituencies next election. A similar set up for legislatures will result in women candidates becoming even more dependent on their respective parties, rather than working within their own constituencies to win elections. Even after being elected in a particular area, there will be no pressure to responsibly serve that constituency because if in the next draw of lots that constituency is de-reserved, these women will have to shift elsewhere for the next election. This will lead to even more irresponsible politics in general, as well as among women. A man may have worked hard in his constituency after being elected. But he will not be sure of being able to stand from the same one if the lottery system decides that constituency is to be earmarked for women. This will inevitably produce a backlash from men and

## A Puppet Minister

### A Profile of Kanti Singh: The Only Woman in the UF Cabinet

Kanti Singh, Minister of State in the Human Resources Development Ministry, called a meeting a few days after she got the job. Officials prepared themselves well, expecting that they would have to brief the first-time Minister from scratch.

They needn't have bothered. The Minister sat through the meeting and asked a few questions. But every time she would say something, her eyes would swivel to Mr Kanti Singh, who sat beside her for the entire 75 minutes. His manner was unintrusive, but the message was clear: in this ministry, it was the Minister's husband who wore the pants.

But not just her husband. The few weeks that she was Minister apparently qualified her for a promotion. From Human Resources Development, she was shifted to the far more powerful Coal Ministry. "*Yeh sab Lalooji ke chalte hua hai,*" she told reporters.

That a housewife like Kanti Singh — with hardly any experience of politics — could rise to such a powerful office is testimony to the United Front's commitment to the empowerment of women, say partymen. But in many ways, Kanti Singh's rise and rise is a metaphor for all that is wrong with the United Front (UF).

Those who were involved in the anti-Emergency movement in Bihar in the mid '70s say they never saw Kanti Singh on the scene, but we have to take Laloo Yadav's word for it that Singh came into politics at that time. Deshav Singh, Kanti's husband, was an overseer with the Bihar Public Works Department in the '70s. No one remembers Kanti as displaying any extraordinary talent for mobilisation, leadership or politics.

But Laloo Yadav must have detected some spark. For in 1992, he thought she was politically mature enough to be appointed party General Secretary. Amid unspoken hostility, Kanti Singh was given charge and was later made to contest the assembly election.

In 1996, Laloo felt she could become a member of Parliament (MP). She was given the Vikramganj seat in west Bihar to contest from.

Laloo not only went to Vikramganj himself to campaign for his protegee, but also ordered four or five ministers in the state government to work for her. She had a formidable opponent — Vashist Narayan Singh, a senior Samata Party candidate who had been close to Laloo at one time. Though the election is under dispute, she won by a margin of 800-odd votes. Her name was recommended for a ministership and when Laloo felt she hadn't got her due, she was given a 'better' ministry.

No one would have objected if Kanti Singh had been competent and talented and Laloo had tried to further her career. But when he was asked why H.D. Deve Gowda had appointed Kanti, he said: "Because we needed a woman in the government." A mystified Maneka Gandhi asked the same question. Not only was she expelled from the party, but the party's women's wing pilloried her for it.

Laloo Yadav can be excused for defending Kanti. He needs reliable right-hand men — and women — in Delhi and the Coal Ministry has a direct bearing on politics (and finance) in Bihar. The UF is a hostage to the Bihar Chief Minister. So competence has to be defined by the yardstick Yadav sets.

The net result is, India has a woman Minister of State for coal, but the decisions are all taken in consultation with : Laloo Yadav and Mr Kanti Singh. Those who can see things going wrong keep quiet. After all, isn't Kanti Singh the embodiment of woman power?



From *Sunday* 15-21 Sept. 1996

damage the legitimacy of women's participation in politics.

Women from the Backward Castes are not covered by the reservation quota announced by the government while women belonging to SCs and STs will be getting one third of the seats reserved for people of that category.

Within the Backward Caste-based parties, the few upper caste women that are members will be the automatic beneficiaries of reservation. But chances are that we will be saddled with more *biwi-beti* brigades because Backward Caste leaders are likely to resort to fielding their mothers or sisters or wives to ensure that the women's quota stays within their caste control and women legislators do not pose any challenge to their power. The current scheme of reservations makes this easy and may further encourage formation of caste-blocs in a party. The men from the OBC communities representing a range of peasant castes and communities including Yadavs, Gujjars, and Vokaliggas have come to dominate politics in almost all the states of India. Now they rule even at the national level after the formation of first the Janata Dal government at the Centre in 1989 and a coalition of various OBC parties in the United Front government. However, women of these communities continue to be among the most oppressed in India and politically insignificant. An obvious proof of this is the near total absence of notable OBC women leaders within the OBC parties. For instance, the few prominent women leaders in the Janata Dal like Pramila Dandavate and Mrinal Gore are from Brahmin families.

The UF government has only one woman minister, Kanti Singh, a total nonentity. Her only claim to fame is her sycophantic relationship to the Bihar Chief Minister, Laloo Prasad Yadav. (see facing page) The women



from various OBC castes in rural areas live under the most crippling restrictions, especially in North India. While certain upper caste groups like Brahmins and Kayasthas have initiated widespread internal social reform movements ever since the 19th century in order to improve the status and rights of women within their communities, very little internal reform work has been undertaken by OBC groups or by the SC and ST communities in relation to women's

rights. As a result their social and political culture remains far more hostile to women's participation in public affairs within their villages and communities. That is why these caste leaders are more likely to capture the women's quota through their wives and daughters who can then be used as puppets and rubber stamps.

### **Biwi-Beti Brigades**

At the *panchayat* level, *biwi* brigades can still serve the useful purpose of getting men used to including women in village debate and decision-making, even if the women are totally lacking in political experience and are used as puppets. The tasks expected of a *panchayat* or corporation member are relatively simple, often concerned with organising civic amenities in the locality with which most villagers have

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close familiarity. Therefore, someone who may initially enter village politics as someone's wife does not necessarily require much time to become a fully functioning *panchayat* leader, provided some of her family restrictions are removed. But the presence of such proxy figures in Parliament and state assemblies is not only counterproductive, but actually harmful. Political socialisation of such women legislators into the parties, required for being an effective member of state assemblies and Parliament, cannot take place smoothly when women members remain filially attached to and politically dependent on the male party leaders. Reproduction of kinship-groups within existing caste-groups in the parties in Parliament and state legislatures is likely to further contribute to the breakdown of our party system and of representative democracy.

There is nothing inherently wrong in women using family connections in politics to gain an advantage, as happens in other professions. The problem arises only when women are used as proxies — a position which even untalented male kin do not allow themselves to be forced upon them. Those women who grow to have an independent existence do not get to be treated derisively even if to begin with they have entered through family connections.

In Chandrika Kumaratunge of Sri Lanka and Aung San Suu Kui, we have two very outstanding examples of women who got a tremendous initial advantage from their political parentage but then emerged out of the

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family shadow and outshone their respective fathers in politics both in terms of political vision as well as quality of political leadership.

Many argue that if sons and nephews can enter politics on the strength of family connections, if such useless men, who are members of mafia and criminal groups, can be selected to represent us in Parliament and state assemblies, why do we have such

macro level for nearly a billion people. It is no place for political novices to learn their first lessons in Parliamentary democracy. Our Parliament and state assemblies are being treated like a joke, contributing seriously to misgovernance in our country. Most of those who get elected are simply ill-equipped for the required political task of devising and improving upon existing legislation, and for facilitating new equations among various social perspectives and political interests. Our entire population is saddled with idiotic laws because many of our legislators don't have the elementary skills or interest in hammering out sensible, implementable legislation. Whenever serious laws are being debated and passed, both the treasury and opposition benches tend to get



**Women left out? Leaders of various parties at a meeting on electoral reforms**

exceptionally high expectations from women?

It is time we began taking our legislatures seriously or they will never function effectively. Parliament ought to be a forum for the most seasoned, thoughtful, and well-informed individuals. It is supposed to perform the awesome responsibility of legislating and policy making at the

emptied out. Our legislators are more adept at coming to blows and staging walk-outs than actually debating issues of importance. We should try to bring about a qualitative change with women's participation in these fora, rather than bring the level of functioning down further with women simply joining as puppets in this disgraceful enterprise.

## What Works Better

Fixed quotas in legislatures exist only in a few countries like Nepal, the Philippines, and the erstwhile Soviet Union. None of these are great success stories for women's political participation. Unfortunately, we insist on following that same route.

The Scandinavian and other European countries which arrived at a relatively high level of female representation did so without reserving seats in Parliament. Rather than freezing women's representation at a quota ceiling, these countries have moved in the direction of equal (and sometimes more than equal) participation in a steady and enduring fashion. Women in these countries are especially active in local institutions of governance. In Sweden, 48 percent of those elected to county councils in 1994 were women and 41 percent of municipal council members were women. This broad based participation at the lower levels provides a rich training ground for intervention at the very top levels, as well, as evidenced by the rising proportion of women in the European Parliament where international affairs are sorted out.

However, in all of these countries these gains have not been made without special efforts. Widespread pressure was created by women's movements which succeeded in organising female voters around pro-women programmes and policies. Secondly, most of the political parties committed themselves to a quota system within their parties in which a certain percentage of candidates for all elections have to be women. Even within the party decision-making fora, a certain percentage of posts are reserved for women by voluntary commitment, rather than legislative coercion. In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party, and

the Green Party have committed themselves to a 50 percent quota for women while the Liberal Party has a 40 percent quota.

In Germany, according to the statutes of the Green Party, at least one half of a the party's posts must be held by women and on electoral lists, women must be represented with a

countries, internal party quotas have yielded a higher representation of women in legislatures without needing to reserve seats because these parties themselves function democratically with financial and political accountability.

In our country, even the best of our women parliamentarians feel sidelined

**Table 1: Women's Presence in Top Decision-Making Committees**

| Party  | Committee                   | No. of Women | Total Members | % of Women |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------|------------|
| CPI(M) | Politburo                   | 0            | 15            | 0          |
|        | Central Committee           | 5            | 70            | 7          |
| CPI    | Secretariat                 | 0            | 9             | 0          |
|        | National Executive          | 3            | 31            | 10         |
|        | National Council            | 6-7*         | 125           | 5          |
| JD     | Political Affairs Committee | 0            | 15            | 0          |
|        | Parliamentary Board         | 0**          | 15            | 0          |
|        | National Executive          | 11           | 75            | 15         |
| UF     | Steering Committee          | 0            | 15-17***      | 0          |
| BJP    | Parliamentary Board         | 1            | 9             | 11         |
|        | Election Committee          | 2            | 17            | 12         |
| Cong   | Working Committee           | 2            | 19            | 11         |

\*The seventh member is a candidate member who participates in discussions but does not vote.

\*\*Normally the state President of the JD's womens wing is invited to attend and offer suggestions, but she does not have a vote. Even this invitation depends upon the wishes of the party President or of the President of the Parliamentary Board.

\*\*\*Total number of members vary due to visitors.

minimum share of 50 percent. In the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the quota for appointed candidates is 40 percent for both men and women. All the parties in Norway have adopted a 40 percent minimum quota for women for each party's governing bodies, as well as for elections to the legislature. The New Labour Party of New Zealand as well as the Green Party have 50 percent quotas for women. In the Netherlands, it varies from 26 percent in the Christian Democratic Party, 33 percent in the Socialist Party to 40 percent in the Green Party. In all these

and powerless within their respective parties. The few women leaders who exist in various parties have not been able to facilitate the entry of greater numbers of women in electoral and party politics, and therefore are an ineffective minority within their own respective parties. The very same male party leaders who compete with each other in announcing special quotas for women have shown little willingness to include women in party decision-making or even to create a conducive atmosphere for women's participation in politics. The representation of

women within the decision-making for a of various political parties is even lower than their representation in Parliament, as Table 1 illustrates. Unless change occurs within each of these parties, women's participation cannot be enhanced because under the present system, parties are the only platform for political socialisation for electoral purposes. If women are not allowed to play an active role in day-to-day functioning of the parties, it becomes far easier for powerful male politicians to corner the women's quota by presenting their own wives and daughters for ticket allocation at election time.

Therefore, my initial response was to suggest that instead of quotas in legislatures, we should ensure quotas within parties through an amendment of the People's Representation Act. Any party which failed to include a certain percent of women in their decision-making bodies and give a certain fixed quota of party tickets to women would merit disqualification. (See my article, 'Why Feminise Corruption?' in *Indian Express*, Oct 4, 1996) However, on second thought this does not seem to be an efficient and workable proposal. Our political parties don't function according to well-defined democratic norms, nor is there much financial transparency. Consequently, thugs and crooks have come to dominate them. Even important posts are often reduced to rubber stamp status. For instance, ever since Indira Gandhi's time, Congress' Working Committee has not been allowed to play the role of a

collective power centre. Most decisions came to be taken in the Prime Minister's Office. Even during the recent crisis in the Congress, all the heavyweight dissidents put together could not prevail upon the former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to call a meeting of the Congress Working Committee at the time they wanted to elect an alternative president. Rao gave up power only when court cases and press exposure made it impossible for him to continue. At the district and state levels, organisational elections have not been held for so long that Congressmen have lost the memory of how to function as a party and instead act like gangsters. Ticket distribution of all parties is controlled by powerful coteries sitting in Delhi rather than being decided locally on the basis of a person's merit and commitment.

As a result, seeking patronage through sycophancy and pay-offs has

become the hallmark of our political culture. Most parties maintain no accounts. Money collected in the name of parties is simply siphoned off into personal accounts, not just by petty local leaders but right up to the Prime Minister's level. Here again, Indira Gandhi played a pioneering role in legitimising this kind of corruption. A large part of the money she collected in the name of the Congress Party through kickbacks, payoffs, and plain extortion is known to have been siphoned off into sundry foreign and Indian accounts which she and her sons controlled personally. This is how she became independent of (and above) the party and began to use the money for horse-trading of MPs and MLAs to ensure that only her sycophants stayed in power. The recent scandal involving the "purchase" of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha MPs by Rao to defeat a no-confidence motion against his minority government is not an isolated incident — it has been a routine happening since Mrs Gandhi's time. Likewise, the recent *hawala* scam demonstrates that other parties have enthusiastically emulated the Congress Party as a role model, despite all the noises they make against its misrule and corruption. The pay-off list mentioned in the Jain diary includes BJP, Janata Dal and Congress leaders of all political shades. Even the left parties tend to adopt this political culture wherever they get into power. Party tickets are increasingly being purchased with pay-offs to top leaders. In such an atmosphere, whether women's representation in party forums is 20 or 50 percent hardly makes a difference.



Courtesy: Indian Express



Moreover, to compel a party to include a fixed quota of women militates against the very principle of democracy. Every political party ought to be free to define and act on its own ideology and principles, including those parties that do not believe in women's political participation.

At the same time, it is urgently required that we take special measures to enhance women's political participation in ways that help them influence decision-making. Our democracy will remain seriously flawed if it fails to yield space to women.

### An Alternative Proposal

A proposal put forward by Shetkari Sangathana of Maharashtra in its Aurangabad Conference of 1993 on seat reservation for women seems to be more promising than the mechanical rotating quota system being currently proposed. This proposal was formulated after the Sangathana carried out a review of the results of the one-third reservation quota for women at the *panchayat* and *zilla parishad* level.

The proposal advocates the creation of multi-seat constituencies, with one-third of the seats reserved for women. For instance, three constituencies could be clubbed together to make one and these clubbed constituencies can be represented by three people, one of whom must be a woman. The first two seats would go to the two candidates who poll the highest number of votes — whether the candidate is a man or a woman. The third seat would go to the woman who polls the highest number of votes among the women



Courtesy: India Today

candidates. This same principle of guaranteed representation for women of at least one-third of all seats could also be extended to a 50 percent reservation for women. In that case each constituency would be represented by two members in Parliament — one man and one woman. This could be done while maintaining our current 'first-past-the-post' system, or even if we adopted a proportional representation system.

There are several advantages of this system:

- Representation of women would not be frozen at a 33 percent limit. Every constituency will be represented by at least one woman but it would not be limited to one if women candidates manage to win general seats as well.

- All the voters in every constituency would get a chance to

vote for a woman candidate, if they so desire, as opposed to the presently proposed quota system, in which voters of only one-third of all constituencies will get an opportunity to elect women candidates.

- The tendency to ignore one's constituency (due to the uncertainty that comes with rotating reserved constituencies) would be reduced. Women would be able to opt for the constituency where they have built support, rather than be shunted around from one constituency to the other.

- Men would not feel forced out of their reserved constituencies, but simply asked to share space with women. All candidates, regardless of sex, would have an opportunity to win one of the first two seats if they are able to garner enough votes. If a party does not wish to field women candidates, it could choose to put up only two candidates. It would not have to draw a total blank in a constituency simply because it did not have eligible women or simply did not want to put up women candidates.

- Women will not be fighting only against other women, but would compete with men as well. They would also get an opportunity to team up with two other colleagues to cover their joint constituency on behalf of their party, so they would not be confined to the *zenana dabba*.

- In multi-seat constituencies, voters will have the choice to elect leaders from more than one party. If the three winning candidates are from different parties, they are likely to act as a check on their colleagues and compete with each other in serving the constituency.

It may well be argued that clubbing three constituencies together will make them unduly large and unwieldy. But then three candidates of the same party are required to campaign and serve it jointly. This may promote a measure of team spirit among our legislators. Moreover, a big constituency is a disadvantage only for those who step into the electoral fray at the last minute and have no real roots in that area. They have to “cover” the entire constituency in the few weeks given for the election campaign. Those who have nurtured their constituencies by prior hard work would not be so handicapped.

However, this system of multi seat constituencies is likely to throw up its own problems which will need careful handling. For instance, what if the third candidate who is to get elected on the reserved quota for women gets an insignificant or minuscule percentage of votes? To ensure that such non-viable candidates don't sneak in merely because they are women, it could be stipulated that whoever is to be elected under the quota has to secure a respectable percentage of the total votes cast. She may have still gotten far fewer votes than the male candidate who comes in third, to which extent it is 'unfair' to the man. But that is the logic of reservations. They cannot be accomplished without a measure of positive discrimination. The chief advantage of this system over the currently proposed system is that it does not disqualify men altogether from one-third of the country's constituencies.

If, in addition, we could put an end to the control over party tickets by the “High Commands”, better quality people might emerge within the various parties. To do this, we would have to ensure by law that the political parties

follow democratic procedures, including party elections held regularly in each and every party, and that there is financial accountability of the parties through strict laws concerning campaign contributions and regular yearly audits of party finances. Parties which fail to fulfill these two criteria could be disqualified from contesting elections. Public funding of elections would also go a long way in reducing the role of money power provided strict checks are kept on elections expenditure. Candidates for the legislature as well as at the *panchayat* and *zilla parishad* level should be selected through primary elections at the appropriate levels by party members and not nominated by state or national level bosses. Parties who are sincerely interested in seeing women participate actively in politics ought to begin by activising their women's fronts at all levels and by including women in their decision-making bodies through a voluntarily committed quota system.

These changes ought to be simultaneously accompanied by other electoral reforms which bring about financial transparency, effective and meaningful control over election expenditure, and well-defined rules that allow for public monitoring. However, the real cleansing of our politics will take place only when being in a position of power in the government (whether as a politician or a bureaucrat) no longer provides a license to loot the public exchequer. The license-permit-kickback *raj* has to be thoroughly dismantled before democracy can work in this country and we can begin to live as free citizens and participate effectively in the governance of our country. □

**We urge our readers to respond to this proposal with their criticisms as well as their suggestions for better alternatives.**



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